

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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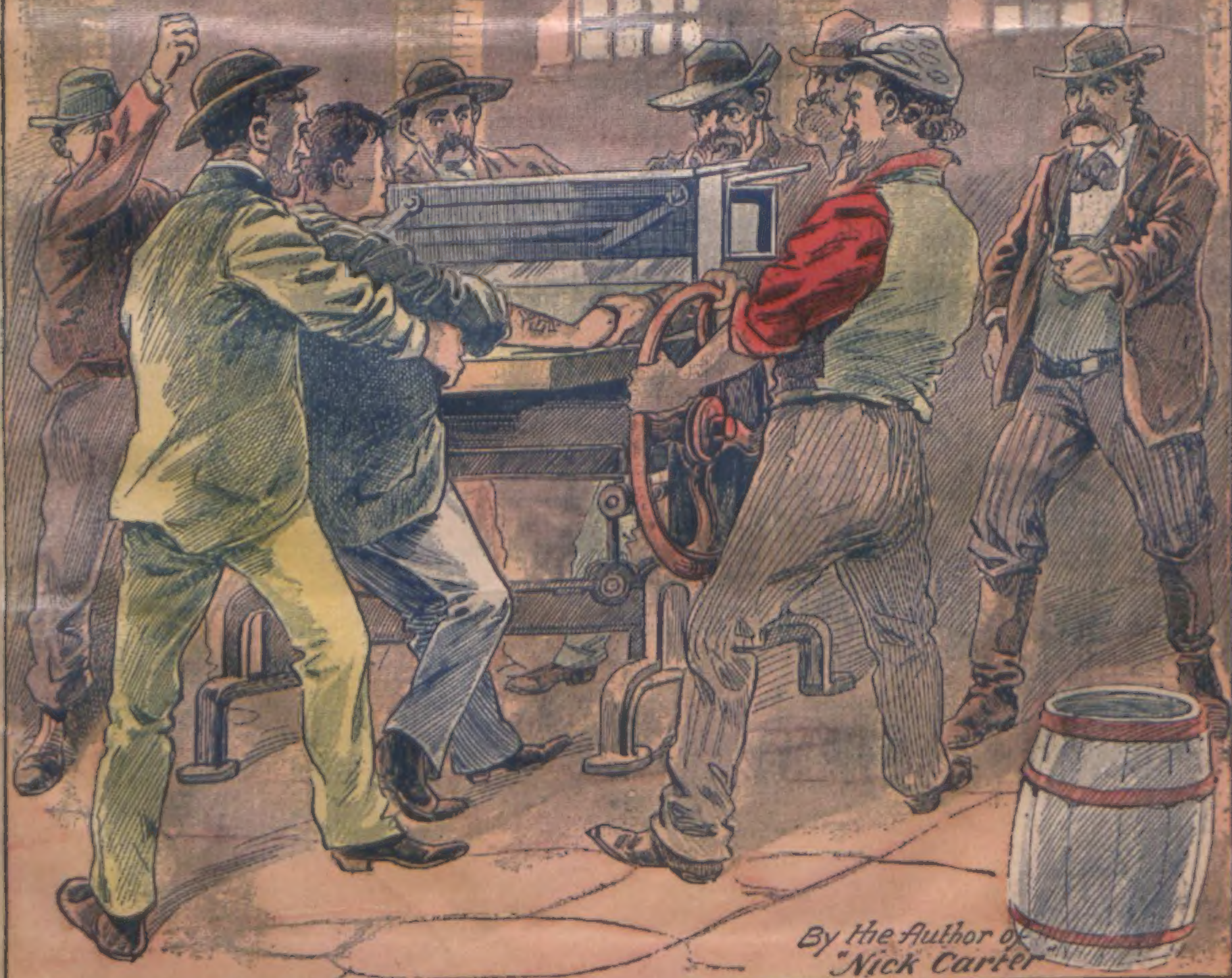
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BOB FERRET'S PASS WORD

OR, THE CHASE OF THE
GOLD SHIP



By the Author of
"Nick Carter"

BOB'S NERVES CREPT AS THE VILLIANS DRAGGED HIS HAND UNDER THE BLADE OF THE PAPER CUTTER.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

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Bob Ferret's Pass-Word

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THE CHASE OF THE GOLD SHIP.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

"VIVA CUBA!"

"Murder!"

A man wearing a semi-military short cloak uttered the word in a curdling shriek.

It was just dusk, and he put down the narrow New York thoroughfare he was in as if suddenly winged.

"Murder!"

Up to the moment when he voiced that fearsome cry there had been only three persons visible within the compass of a whole square.

He had previously been proceeding rapidly, furtive, engrossed.

One on each side of the street—unseen by him—dodging from doorway to doorway, from the shelter of sign to sign, two persons had shadowed thus secretly and cautiously his every movement.

Abruptly the street held four.

As the cloaked man passed a pair of dark, steep cellar steps, as his two trailers with signals waved across the street

closed in on him slightly, up there sprang as from the earth a tall, thin individual, armed with a knife.

The newcomer—angular, alert, fire-eyed, weapon waving—had materialized in a way positively startling, tragic and ghostlike.

"Have a care of yourself!" he screamed shrilly, and made a swoop.

"'Tis he—the dead!" gasped the cloaked man.

"'Tis you—the doomed!" snarled the other. "Die!"

A knife blade matchlessly bright cut the air with a whistle.

With a yell of terror the destined victim dodged, staggered, and turning ran like an arrow, the other after him.

"Murder!"

There was a thrill of hopeless dread and horror in the quavering accents now.

Instantly the two persons who had so deftly and secretly kept pace with the cloaked man abandoned all caution and mystery.

By a common impulse they came to-

gether, and became ardent pursuers instead of careful trailers.

"What do you make of this, Bob?" swiftly shot out the one who had crossed the road.

"Why, the man we're after has run afoul of an enemy."

"Acts like an assassin!"

"Take him—you, Jack. We want to find out who he is and what he knows, if possible."

"Take him? Yes, Bob, if we can catch him."

"He's caught our man!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Run!"

"The mischief!"

The last speaker—Bob Ferret, the cleverest of famous Nick Carter's professional novices—arms pressed closely to his side, darted ahead like a flash, with the startled ejaculation.

His companion—Jack Burton, the muscular young giant of Nick Carter's detective school—was so quick and ready at his lead that they ran like a trained team.

Ahead fifty paces, the mortal dread of the man in the cloak and the savage ferocity of his pursuer promised to culminate in a sanguinary climax at once.

The former was frantic and ran like a fox, but the other—long-limbed, loose-jointed—pursued as would a hound.

He made a swoop of that sinister gleaming knife.

It slit the other's cloak half its length.

That other must have felt the contact of the pointed steel, for he gave utterance to a piercing scream.

He threw up his hands as in wild despair.

He made a forlorn-hope rush for the one weapon—the only weapon in sight.

It was a ham suspended in front of a closed up butcher shop.

It hung from the uncovered awning

bar, and he tore it free with a snap of its loop ribbon.

Reversing it like a club, he faced his foe, white, trembling, gasping, but with a certain frenzy that looked like courage, but was simply desperation.

He brought it around like a cricket mace—the man with the knife dodged.

He raised it over one shoulder like an Indian club—his adversary made a knife lunge for his vitals.

The one was aiming to crush back the knife, the other to reach his enemy's heart with that weapon before the bulky missile could intervene as a shield.

"Ha!" hissed the would-be murderer.

"Assassin!" gasped the other.

Both staggered as under a shock.

The tragic had suddenly become interspersed with a situation startlingly comic.

Knife and ham had met—the one flashing up, the other crashing down.

The knife was sharp as a razor—the ham was a "dummy."

It was heavy, filled with sawdust, and the blade just spitted it.

A tearing rip, a yellow dusty flitter, and the air seemed to contain a bursting sun.

The cloaked man let go of the ham and ran for his life.

The other foamed hissing at the mouth as he wrested with the rent and interfering mass of sawdust and painted canvas.

He blinked and shook his head to clear his eyes, half-blinded by the fine particles that filled the air like motes.

"Grab this one!" spoke Bob quickly to his companion.

"All right!" breathed Jack.

Both made a pounce at the man with the knife.

They seized him as he was about to put after the fugitive.

He darted a swift look at his detainers.

"You interfere at your peril!" he gasped.

"One word, my man——" began Bob.

"We can't let you do murder!" interpolated Jack.

"Murder? Vendetta! vengeance! justice—release me!"

"No."

"I tell you—yes!"

The man had kept his long hands free by raising them high above his long body.

The young detectives' hands clasped him on either side, holding firmly to folds in the loose, tightly buttoned up coat he wore which enveloped him from neck to heels.

He made a side swing, supple as a willow.

The movement raised Bob bodily from his feet, but he clung with tenacity.

The man gave a peculiar writhe that was convulsive as the wriggle of a snake.

Strong as Jack Burton was, the unusual and unexpected manœuvre made him trip and stumble.

He, too, held on—it was a rule with Nick Carter's young detectives never to let go till they had to.

Whirling, the man swung both his captors round half-a-circle sweep.

Then he backed quite as suddenly.

There was a snap, a tearing jar, and he made a forward bound.

"The old trick!" muttered Jack.

"Slipped out of his coat. He's free!" cried Bob.

"Look—who is he?"

"No! what is he?"

What? indeed!—for the man as now revealed certainly belonged to no genus Bob could fix.

A marvelous thing had come to light.

The man, as he ran, caught up, looped up, wound up like a rope, massed like a woman's flaxen coils, an enormous beard.

Fully six feet long, it tripped him till he had swept it out of his way.

It appended from his pale thin face like

a fringe—it covered neck, breast, body, like a curtain.

"Wonders!" blurted Jack, electrified.

"A freak!" voiced Bob.

The discovery they had made for a moment caused their marveling curiosity to drive professional alertness into the background.

Quickly, however, Bob recovered himself.

Whipping the torn, abandoned coat into a wad as he ran, he essayed to make up for lost time.

Somewhere in his vest the remarkable man who had escaped them had stowed his enormous beard.

His limbs now less hampered by it and the coat, he covered the ground in springs.

If thirty seconds had been lost by his detention, he made them up through renewed vigor.

A hawk bound for its prey, he was shooting after the fellow in the cloak, and the latter, turning, ejected another of those frenzied, frightened yells.

"He's going to get him!" panted Jack.

"He mustn't!" declared Bob.

"See! a blind course."

Such the prospect now seemed.

The man in the cloak had turned where the street turned—into a narrow passageway.

The man with the long beard darted after him.

Six seconds in his wake, Nick Carter's young detectives rounded also.

Fifty feet ahead was a building of brick—its rear—windowless, grim.

"A dead wall," commented Bob, spurring.

"It's got a door," said Jack.

Its whole lower story was a kind of a door, or looked like one.

For this the man in the cloak was diving.

Now, only twenty feet to his rear, his pursuer bounded.

It seemed as if the foremost runner would land squarely against the heavy mass of boards with a death-dealing slam.

He let out a yell that mingled a few indistinguishable words.

The other raised his knife.

It flew like a dart with his swift whirling hand, as he sprang up and onward.

Bob curdled, and Jack's eyes followed its course dilating.

It was aimed to take the fugitive directly in the back of the neck.

If it ever landed there, the deed was done!

It did not land there.

So near that it would sheathe the victim hilt-deep, in another second that victim dropped.

It was a duck, a dive, a dodge.

Whang!

Into the timbers quivering the knife blade sank, so forcibly that its holder was driven back with a shock.

Through a small section of the lowermost corner of the great frame barrier went the intended victim.

It gave with a sweep, it closed with a snap.

Magically, marvelously, like a harlequin vanishing through a trap, the man with the cloak had shot through the spot as if it was tissue paper.

He yelled out two words as he did so.

A key, a password, they had opened his way to freedom:

"Viva Cuba!"

CHAPTER II.

BREAKING IN.

Viva Cuba!

Bob Ferret pricked up his ears with manifest interest as the words rang out plainly from the fugitive's lips.

Jack Burton's eyes opened wider than ever.

It was apparent that the strange, quick cry bore additional enlightenment to him as well.

The glances of the two young detectives met, knowingly, significantly.

"That settles it!" pronounced Bob.

"It certainly does," assented Jack.

"Our man is on another section of his old racket."

"And the other one?"

Jack meant the man who had thrown the knife.

He had vanished.

As speedily, as magically as had the man with the cloak, he of the phenomenal whiskers had disappeared.

It was dusk, and that had helped him to escape untraced.

Peering, investigating, Bob saw that he might have glided away through any one of a dozen breaks in adjoining cellars, over any one of many contiguous shed roofs.

"We ought to have got him," remarked Jack, thoughtfully.

"Oh, I don't know that."

"He's mixed up with Castelar?"

"Yes, the cloaked man knows him—tragically."

"What do you think?"

"Why, what the surface shows."

"And that is?"

"Some long hair fiend."

"Or museum freak."

"Probably both. He's got a vital grudge against Castelar—that's evident."

"A 'vendetta,' he called it."

"Castelar thought him dead, I should judge, and ran, scared to death. It's some personal quarrel we are not particularly concerned in."

"The fellow meant murder."

"No doubt of that."

"He might tell us a good deal about Castelar?"

"Well, we'll probably run across him again before this affair ripens," said Bob. "In the meantime, let us attend to the square, plain, practical issues of the square, plain, practical case we have been engaged to run down."

"The Cuban conspirators?"

"The filibusters, yes."

Bob covered the whole affair in hand with that expression.

Nick Carter's two brightest pupils were engaged on a peculiar case.

Its elements were in the closest touch with current popular excitement.

In brief, they had been retained to find out what the Government detectives had failed to unearth.

For some months these latter had been running down rumors to the effect that in various large coast cities, and especially in New York, secret bands were forming

to set sail for Cuba and help the insurgents in that distressed country fight against the iron rule of Spain.

While really in sympathy with the movement, the Government was legally obliged to nip all such schemes in the bud.

It was the rule of nations that such assistance could only be winked at through the risk of open war.

The Government detectives had found their hands full.

Public sentiment and public money very generously supported the bands forming to wage independent battle in behalf of Cuba's freedom.

They were obliged to let the patriots meet, discuss and plan, meantime watching out to see that no arms or soldiers were overtly shipped to Cuba.

A large New York representation of the most enthusiastic and belligerent type existed.

One of the men who talked the loudest and threatened to raise the biggest army, was a fellow named Castelar.

He professed to be an exile from Cuba, and he really looked like a Spaniard.

The Government detectives, however, although they could not disclose this man's past nor really ferret out his motives, became satisfied that he was playing the Cuban patriot act simply as a blind.

They were certain that he was engaged in some deep criminal plot in which he was to be aided by his professed attachment for the cause of freedom.

An appeal had been made to Nick Carter to run down this fellow's history, to get an inkling of what he was really working for.

Two hours since, in pursuance of this programme, Bob and Jack had started out on the case.

They had located Castelar at the known meeting place of the patriots.

They had shadowed him thence, with the results shown.

"It's a sinister beginning, this," said Bob.

He glided up to the plank where the half imbedded knife was in full view as he spoke.

"Get into shadow," he suggested, drawing out the weapon and moving into

a niche of the building beyond range of the door. "Now, then, Jack, we've run Castelar down."

"It looks so, and into a place where the Cuba business continues. You heard the password?"

"It opened a spring section of that door by magic."

"What do you think?"

"I'm thinking now," answered Bob.

Jack left his companion alone for a minute or two.

When Bob spoke again he listened intently, for he knew he had made up his mind as to the situation.

"Jack," said the latter, "this secrecy, this mysterious den here, suggests just one thing to me."

"Let's hear it, Bob."

"In a direct line with what the Government fellows say—Castelar isn't true blue."

"To the Cuban cause?"

"Exactly. To my way of thinking, he is using his patriotism as a cloak."

"You believe he has some other scheme?"

"A big one."

"In the Cuban line?"

"Possibly, possibly not—but there behind that door is a secret den—passwords, mysterious portal, and all that. There he is hatching his real plot."

"And there we must get!"

"That's the next step, I guess."

Bob examined the coat abandoned by the man with the long whiskers.

He found nothing in its pockets, cast it aside, and began turning the knife over in his hands investigatively.

"Hello!" he cried sharply, as its handle clicked.

"What you found out, Bob?"

"That long-bearded fellow is with some show—step aside!"

Bob interrupted himself by stowing the knife in his pocket and pulling Jack deeper into the shadow.

A man had come hurriedly down the court.

"Viva Cuba!" he spoke, approaching the plank-filled rear of the building into which Castelar had disappeared.

At once a corner section opened—at once the man vanished, the aperture filling up almost hermetically after him.

This incident distracted attention from the knife, the cause of Bob's last unfinished remark.

"You see?" he said.

"There may be a lot of them in there," suggested Jack.

"And up to something sinister. If they are real Cuban patriots they have a meeting place already, and why this doubly guarded den? They're not, and I'm going to find out what is going on in there."

"That's the ticket!"

"Come ahead."

Neither Bob nor Jack had ever been in the present exact locality before.

They had a set system for overlooking a building, however, on all occasions, and this they now put into operation.

Separating, they started in different directions to round the building, the group, the square, if necessary.

Ten minutes later, Jack, floundering over a rubbish heap, came directly upon his comrade.

Bob stood at the side of two gaps in the brick wall of a cellar.

"Found out something?" inquired Jack.

"A way to somewhere, yes," answered Bob—"two ways."

Bob pointed to the gaps in the brickwork.

"It's dark as pitch in there," he said. "A wall divides those two apertures. Suppose you take one side?"

"Suppose I do."

"I'll investigate the other."

"All right."

The twain separated, each taking the course agreed on.

Bob penetrated a cellar. The only indication he had that it might lead to some desired point, was the fact that the ground about its entrance showed unmistakable signs of constant usage.

He went around it twice, to find no opening but the one he had come in at.

He did find a slanting plank, however, set on an easy angle.

"Smooth and worn," he commented. "Up we go!"

When Bob got to its top, he found that it ended in an unpartitioned, floorless apartment.

Once in a while he would catch vague

echoes—speakers moving about overhead, or at one side.

He crept over a dozen rafters with caution.

It was pitchy dark, but he dared not risk lighting a match.

"This is the entrance to somewhere," he began—"trouble!"

Bob shot out the word and shot ahead fast as he knew how to go.

Creeping, his head had struck something—a dangling string of sleigh bells.

The alarming echo of their tintinabulation filled the place with startling clamor.

Bob crept ahead, trusting to luck to strike some shelter—some angle, some wall.

With a bump his head struck one side of the great bare apartment, just as he had concluded to drop through the rafter space into the cellar pit below.

Simultaneously light flooded the place—the bell warning had been heard and heeded.

A door—with nothingness at its threshold—twenty feet up, opened.

A man, lamp in hand, leaned over the abyss.

"Who is there?" he called down sharply.

He moved the light all around the place, beginning at one corner, as he spoke.

Bob held his breath and edged close into the framework of some aperture he had chanced upon.

He squeezed closer, closer, as that advancing focus of light approached like some probing, ferreting eye.

"In another minute!" he calculated.

Snap! went a catch, a wedge, a nail.

The shutter back of him had given way under the pressure of his shoulders.

He heard it fall—not far.

He followed it, knowing the ground must be soft, from its gentle landing.

"Ugh!"

Bob struck something, and it moved.

"Somebody!" he uttered.

He had landed on a man, prone and snoring.

A few confused words as the fellow turned over, as Bob got a whiff of his fiery breath, convinced the latter that the man was intoxicated.

His hand swung out as he flooped over,

and it struck Bob's arm, a bottle dropping from his grasp.

Bob wondered how he had come to select this secluded spot for a couch, for the tortuous windings of the open space about the buildings looming up all around would have puzzled a sober stranger.

Bob, proceeding along, nearly slid where he saw the drunken fellow must have got a fall.

The drippings from a hydrant trailed over the ground, and there was a long streak where the slider had taken a dive, gathering up the mud as if he was a mop.

A broken clay pipe and scattered tobacco showed further evidence of the fall.

Then, right near to them, Bob noticed a slightly crumpled white card.

He picked it up. A door opened somewhere, and he glided around the corner of the building.

It was to come face to face with the very door he had heard open.

Face to face, as well, with a man standing by it.

He was outlined by the rays of a light beyond, and this illumination struck Bob's face also.

"Well?" questioned the man calmly.

"Hello!" mumbled Bob.

"Thought I heard something. Did you knock?"

A little off his balance by the unexpected question, Bob blurted out what struck him as possibly the most appropriate for the occasion.

"Viva Cuba!" he said.

"Right!" instantly declared the fellow at the door. "Oh, I see!"

He reached out and took the card, which Bob had retained in his hand without thinking or knowing what it was.

"All correct," he nodded, glancing at it and returning it—"pass in."

Bob was a trifle taken aback.

Quick as lightning ran his thoughts, however.

What part was he expected to play.

He dared not hesitate, so he took the plunge boldly.

Bob Ferret passed in, passing as he did so the threshold of an undertaking the most sinister and thrilling of all his eventful detective career.

CHAPTER III.

BEARDING THE LION.

As the man returned Bob the card, he closed and bolted the door.

The tumbling shutter and the young detective's fall on the drunken man he must have taken for some one seeking admittance.

Bob had rarely done such rush work as the present on impulse.

He had broken into Castelar's secret den—the watchword showed that.

What of the card?

"Free pass," murmured Bob, taking a glance at it. "What for?"

It bore the words:

"Stupid as an owl, but a fighter and a stayer."

"Who from?" interrogated Bob, but he could make nothing out of a scrawling signature attached.

"Letter of introduction," he concluded, "for the drunken fellow who fell by the wayside. If he's not discovered or don't wake up, I'll try and fill his shoes for him for a time. Will I pass muster?"

Bob believed that he would.

He had taken the present trail arrayed and looking the seedy adventurer out of work.

Giving his hat a loaferish tilt and his shoulders the slouching hunch of a person likely to be "a fighter and a stayer," Bob started boldly for the room where the light was.

Three persons occupied it. Bob decided they were either river pirates or land sharks—perhaps a mixture of both.

They seemed to be waiting for somebody or something, and Bob sat down to wait, too.

The place looked as if it had been a printing establishment at some time or other.

Over in a corner was the wreck of a big press, in another cases of type were piled, horse high.

There was a dust-covered paper-cutter that looked like a guillotine, and an imposing stone on which one of the loungers sprawled, smoking.

Bob dropped to a stool, taking everything in sharply.

"Give me that," suddenly spoke the man who had admitted him, approaching with extended hand.

"Oh, the card?" asked Bob.

"Yes."

The man bore the bit of pasteboard to an interior door, pushed it open, and disappeared.

"In a minute," he nodded, returning shortly.

"In a minute what, I wonder?" cogitated Bob.

The same door opened while he was speculating over his situation.

"Castelar!" breathed Bob, recognizing the last comer.

He knew the man instantly, although he no longer wore the cloak which had distinguished him in that mad race with the long bearded freak.

Castelar ran his eyes over the group and evidently making out Bob as a stranger, beckoned to him.

"Did our friend make you understand what's expected of you?" he asked.

Castelar waved the card as he spoke, and Bob guessed that he referred to its writer.

"Oh, so-so," answered Bob.

"He says you're a fighter?"

Bob looked around challengingly and rolled up one cuff.

"Got anything you want licked?" he demanded.

"Not here, not now—it's not that kind of muscle we want."

"Isn't?"

"No. We want half a dozen picked men not afraid of—powder."

"I see."

"Fire, water, bombs——"

"They ain't so much!"

"Dynamite—torpedoes!"

"I won't scare, if my pay runs on."

"You're young, but will do, I guess. One thing, my man, though," pursued Castelar, fixing a piercing eye on Bob—"our friend guarantees you."

"And I guarantee myself."

"The minute you sign with us, it's blind duty."

"I'll obey orders and never peep."

"At the end of it there may be a risk."

"What risk?" queried Bob, indifferently. "The risk of hanging."

Bob looked more interested than scared.

"There'll be more than one in the deal, won't there?" he drawled, coolly.

"Yes."

"Then," announced Bob, with a complacent grin, "I'll have company."

"Come in here."

Bob felt that he was accepted as a full-fledged recruit.

What his line of duty was to be was what appealed to his curiosity now.

There were two other men in the apartment into which Castelar led him.

They barely glanced at the newcomer, for they were occupied leaning over a chart spread upon a table.

Bob noted a finger trace the coast line south from New York harbor on the map, and longed to get an inkling of what the men were discussing.

He knew that it appertained to no valourous invasion of Cuba, however, as he caught the words:

"——and cut for the Pacific slope across country soon as the trick is done."

"This way," Castelar interrupted, leading Bob past the men to a little stand.

Upon it stood a singular-looking contrivance, like a rubber stamp hand press.

This Castelar touched.

"Our friend has posted you, as you say," he remarked, "so there is no need of wasting time. I order—you obey. Just one thing, though—when you sign, you're one of us."

"I am."

"Body and soul—no drawing back."

"Who wants to?"

"That's the talk! We all take a terrible risk, but look at the immense reward!"

"I should say so!" voiced Bob.

He was audacious—floundering in all kinds of surmises and guesswork—but he resolved to keep up a good front.

"You want to sign?"

"You bet!"

"Put out your hand, then."

Bob did so.

"Spread it flat on the stand."

"There it is."

"Pull your sleeve up a little."

Bob bared his wrist.

Around it Castelar clamped the press. Then he gave the downward squeeze of a lever.

Bob winced a trifle. Minute needle points seemed to run into his veins.

He knew what was being done—some brand was being worked into his flesh by

an ingenious patent, half stamp, half tattoo device, helped with the aid of acids, for he felt the same trickle.

"Now you're one of a crowd that will never go back on a pal," pronounced Castelar. "If you every tried it on, that mark, indelible, perpetual, would aid us in hunting you at the farthest ends of the earth!"

Bob felt that he was getting in pretty deep. He did not fancy the permanent disfigurement one bit.

Still, he could not draw back now.

"Stand still and keep your hand there for five minutes or so, till the chemicals work right," directed Castelar.

Bob was willing enough, for he wanted an opportunity to listen to what the two men at the table were discussing.

He did not hear much. Castelar paused to ask a question.

"Got it figured out?" he interrogated.

"Yes," replied one of the others.

"When do we move?"

"To-morrow morning. I'm going to leave here to-night."

"Why? what for?"

"For many reasons—we've found out all those Cuban fellows can tell of what they are going to do."

"You have."

"Thanks to my high, patriotic valor! yes," sneered Castelar, "so I had better slip off the scene secretly. Besides, it's no longer safe for me hereabouts."

"No?"

"I have discovered an enemy I thought dead—it makes my blood run cold to think of him!"

Castelar shivered as he spoke, and Bob guessed immediately that he referred to the man with the long beard.

"I'll get you those papers now," proceeded Castelar, composing himself somewhat, "and then I'll leave the rest to you."

He went over to where a boxed-in affair projected from the wall.

Bob guessed that when the place was used for printing purposes this had comprised a hoist for type, forms, and the like.

Now it had a door, having evidently been brought into utility as a cupboard.

Its knob Castelar seized.

"Arrange all the details here, because

when we go we go for good——" he began: "Plague take it! what's seized the door, anyway?"

He began to pull.

"Stuck," suggested one of his confederates.

"With rivet bolts, you'd think! Why, it won't come. The mischief!"

Castelar gave a great pull and went keeling.

The door came open suddenly.

Bob saw why it had not opened before—it was not stuck shut, it had been held shut.

For, clinging to the other inside knob was the person who had held it.

He came shooting out, dragged out now, landing squarely on top of the prostrate Castelar.

It was Jack—Jack Burton, of Nick Carter's detective school.

CHAPTER IV.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

Bob Ferret gave a prodigious start.

Jack had got into the den as well as himself, but Jack was now in all kinds of trouble.

Bob's first impulse was to spring forward into action—boldly arrayed to assist his friend and comrade.

With a wince he held back—the stamp clamped to his hand reminded him that he was scarcely a free agent for the present.

A chain held it to the stand—to break it loose would be to attract instant attention and suspicion.

Castelar had set it—Bob had no time to study its mechanism.

"An outsider!" yelled Castelar.

He had grabbed Jack and was rolling on the floor with him.

His two companions instantly came to his help.

Jack struck out—one went kiting.

Sitting on Castelar, holding him squirming helplessly, Jack gave the second a biff that sent him spinning.

He took a swift glance about the room, a comprehensive look at Bob, at the single door, and bolted for the latter.

"Grab him!"

"Got him!"

The noise of the scuffle had attracted the four men in the adjoining apartment.

At the threshold Jack was met by a massed human barrier.

Borne back by a force he could not well overcome, he was finally held, panting and glaring, lots of fight in him yet, but with no opportunity to call it into action.

"Here's a go!" voiced Castelar, struggling to his feet. "How did you get in that cupboard?"

"Why, slipped down, of course," put in one of his recent helpers, nursing his broken head.

"From an upper floor?"

"How else?"

"What for?"

"Look and guess!"

Castelar uttered a great cry. He sprang to the cupboard.

On its floor a disordered mass of letters and documents told that they had not been pushed from a shelf.

They bore the appearance of having been opened, inspected. Bob voted that Jack had been engaged in active work.

"This settles it!" hissed Castelar, and he glared fiercely into Jack's cool, dauntless face. "You spy!"

"No!" pronounced Jack.

He wriggled free from the two men holding him as he spoke.

They let him, for they had by this time tied his hands behind him.

"Traitor!" hissed Castelar, still more malevolently.

"Guess again," intimated the imperturbable Jack.

"Meddler! Where's my belt, my pistols?"

"Wrong! I'm a high kicker!"

"Stop!"

"Smash him!"

"Whew!"

Jack Burton had let himself loose.

If he had to die, he would make the last scene an interesting and an animated one for his executioners.

He might have been planning to give Bob time to think—to get fully free and help him.

In the space of ten seconds, however, Jack proved his record on several masterly phases of rare athletic proficiency.

He simply showed his adversaries what an active expert in the gymnastic line could really do when put on his mettle.

Bob began trying to remove the clamped stamp imprisoning his hand.

Brief time and attention would probably find its secret lock, but he was not afforded much of the one, could not centre the other.

Jack filled his vision, as did Jack the room—with confusion, amazement and alarm, within fifteen seconds' time.

He made a rush for Castelar, darting for a corner where his cloak, other garments and his weapons were.

A person raising a stick from the floor could not have done so more squarely, easily and quickly than did Jack one foot.

Whack!

With a howl Castelar went tipping and tilting, his jaws sent snapping like vise teeth.

Jack whirled his other foot—it struck one of the other fellows across the weak spot behind the knees, and he hobbled and tumbled.

A third went down like a wooden man, bunted by Jack right between the shoulders.

"Come on, ten-pins!" cried Jack, irrepressibly.

He had the crowd on the run—he kept them on the run.

It was a thrilling, an incredible sight.

It simply showed, however, what training had done for Jack in the superb gymnasium of Nick Carter's detective school.

His hands tied, hampered, outnumbered, the way he used those nimble feet of his was astounding.

Bob judged from their actions that not one of the opposing crowd had his weapons about him.

Unarmed, they scuffled and dodged before the swinging, sliding, gyrating cyclone of action, never still.

"What's he hoping to make of it?" muttered Bob, tugging at the stamp press.

He soon saw.

One end of the room was partitioned off to within four feet of the ceiling.

It looked as if the space beyond might have an exit.

For this Bob saw Jack head.

He executed a daring manœuvre before doing so, however.

In the middle of the room, fully nine feet up, was a hanging lamp.

Jack braced under it.

Bang!

He was a vibrating initial of his own name—a supple J—as both feet struck its bottom.

Up to the ceiling flaring wildly went the lamp.

Down it jangled, smashed to pieces, but extinguished.

Only the light from the other room now illuminated the apartment.

Jack started on a sudden run.

“The marvel!”

“The idiot!”

“Yes, he’s trapped!”

“Close in on him, now!”

Jack reached the partition on a bound. He lifted himself, light as a gazelle.

Over he went, his head scraping the ceiling, and came down amid a frightful clatter.

Every man in the room darted for the barrier the audacious sprinter had just cleared.

Castelar pulled open a door. Bob peered anxiously as the crowd passed through it.

From the banging clatter of tin pans and iron pots, he guessed that Jack had found no easy landing place.

One of the men ran for a lamp, and its rays showed Jack, pretty badly used up, but still struggling with his adversaries.

He gave them a parting crack—the whip swing—then he subsided.

Castelar tripped him—bound feet were added to the hindrance of tied hands.

There was something malicious in the swing that gave Jack a toss to a mattress lying against one wall of the room.

Castelar was bruised, panting, alarmed, ferocious.

He glared down at his captive.

“Who are you, anyway?” he demanded.

“Seems as if I’m a has-been, don’t it?” coolly propounded Jack.

“You won’t gain anything by being brash.”

“I don’t expect to.”

“What brought you here?”

“Want to know?”

“You had better tell!”

“Well,” declared Jack, frankly, “I’d like to join the Cuban patriots.”

Castelar gave a quick start.

“I knew it! this is no accident—he’s a spy!” he hissed, turning a face full of anxious perplexity on a companion.

“Who’d hire a spy?”

“Some one who knows——”

“Don’t say it! But I believe you’re right.”

“Anything wrong in wanting to join the Cuban patriots?” inquired Jack, placidly.

“You can’t hoodwink me!” flared Castelar.

“I’ve made a very simple proposition.”

“That never brought you here.”

“Why didn’t it?”

“Because a fellow as knowing as you is perfectly well aware of the location of the Cuban headquarters.”

“Is that so?” cried Jack.

“They are not here.”

“Then,” demanded Jack, with pertinent emphasis, “if this isn’t a Cuban patriot joint, what do you pretend this place to be?”

“Ah!”

A sinister scowl ran the rounds of the listening men.

“You see?” cried Castelar.

“He’s onto us, right enough!”

“Which settles him finally. Leave him to me.”

Castelar’s face was white and working as he turned from his captive.

The others scattered about the room, discussing the intrusion with lowering faces. Bob read the intensest agitation in Castelar’s snapping eyes.

“Ah!” he exclaimed—“I forgot you.”

He came up to Bob and released him.

“It’s fixed,” he remarked, glancing at Bob’s wrist.

The latter saw some hieroglyphic signs impressed where the stamp had rested.

“You must settle him,” spoke one of the men coming up just then.

“What’s that?” retorted Castelar.

“The crowd demand it.”

“Very well.”

“They won’t move a step in your scheme, with a fellow alive whose every word shows him to be a spy.”

“Let them end him, then—no, wait!”

Castelar fixed his eyes on Bob as if a vivid idea had struck him.

“The very thing!” he announced.

Bob wondered what was coming.

He rubbed his sore and smarting wrist expectantly.

"You are one of us now," spoke Castelar.

"To the death!" asserted Bob, enthusiastic in his role or nothing.

"And for the death?"

"What do you mean?"

"We are going to test your bravery!"

Bob waited for the rest of it.

"Your fidelity!"

"All right," nodded Bob, but a big lump began to rise in his throat, for he suspected what was coming.

"Our friend who sent you says you are afraid of nothing," proceeded Castelar.

"Not I!" vaunted Bob.

"You have a chance to make yourself very solid with us."

"Good!"

"Right now."

"Have I?"

"You have."

"Doing what?"

Bob felt as if Castelar was dragging his nerves out by the roots through the sharp sudden movement he made in turning toward the spot where Jack lay.

Pointing to his helpless, recumbent captive with a menacing, murderous finger, Castelar hissed malevolently:

"Kill that spy!"

CHAPTER V.

THE FACE AT THE TRAP.

"Whoop!"

Bob Ferret sprang a foot in the air with the ringing yell.

Every man in the room stared at him in wonder.

All had heard the cold-blooded proposition of Castelar—all were amazed at the way in which it had been received.

For one flashing second Bob had felt his heart stand still at a realization of the horrible situation in which he found himself.

Then in a twinkling a suggestion, an inspiration, came to his rescue, and he knew what to do and how to do it.

Bob decided to play the sanguinary executioner promptly, sensationally.

He would, indeed, "make himself solid!" with these heartless scoundrels, by displaying a ferocity that would phase even their hardened natures.

"Blood!" he shouted, cracking his heels together in vicious jubilation and blaring like a cormorant. "Good!"

"You'll do it?" demanded Castelar.

"Ask me! Stand back—I'm pining for gore!"

Bob's bloodthirsty eagerness made the others fairly shrink.

"Here—give him a knife, some of you," called Castelar.

"Yes, the silent route!" spoke up one of the crowd, promptly presenting a weapon.

"No—this!"

Bob had drawn from his pocket the knife that had so nearly ended Castelar's life an hour previous.

It was the gleaming blade of the man with the long beard, and he waved it above his head till the air seemed a flare of silver lightning.

"End him—make sure!" urged Castelar.

"Whoop!" screamed Bob, at the top of his voice.

It was twenty feet to the corner where Jack lay.

Toward it, an apparent sanguinary assassin swooping down with glee upon a hated foe, Bob fairly flew.

His shouts, his actions had wrought the spectators up to the highest pitch of excitement.

Bob had planned for this—to unsteady the sure glance, to deaden all suspicion.

As he ran both hands manipulated the knife he carried.

Some such a click sounded as that when he first secured the knife outside, an explanation of which to Jack had been interrupted.

At Bob now with wondering eyes, almost frightened eyes, Jack stared.

He could not understand his comrade's motive.

That it was no ordinary one he was certain, for with Bob's clever acting always prefaced a clever play.

He pounced down upon Jack like a hurricane.

"Mind your eye!" swept Jack's ears in a quick fluttering breath.

"What?"

"Play the death role."

"Good!"

Bob made a sweep of the cords securing Jack's hands.

He was between the captive and the others as he did this.

Now, swaying to one side so that every watching eye could see his slightest manœuvre, he raised the glittering blade.

"One!" shouted Bob.

Down came the knife—a fearful groan rent Jack Burton's lips.

Clear to the hilt, squarely into his breast, the blade sank.

"Two!"

It rose—descended.

A quiver—the life breath seemed to leave the captive's body in one quick, gurgling gasp.

"Three!" voiced Bob, with the frenzy of a fiend.

The blade sank again—clear to the hilt.

The handle only protruding, Bob left it there!

The body took the sharp, statue-like pose of rigidity.

Bob advanced upon the staring throng coolly wiping his hands on his coat.

"You did—well," spoke Castelar, but his lips showed a slight line of pallor, a visible shudder made his face quiver, as if the bloodthirsty indifference of his appointed executioner had something eerie and terrifying in it.

"Cover him up?" asked Bob.

"Till we can ship him, yes," nodded Castelar.

The "tragedy" had somewhat unsteadied him.

Bob seized an old counterpane hanging on a nail.

Advancing with it again to Jack's proximity gave him a wished-for opportunity.

"Slip the catch when you want the blade to play," he whispered. "Cut the ropes at your feet. There's some kind of a trap in the floor just above your head."

Then Bob threw the counterpane over his comrade—quite as lively as ever, and "still in the ring!"

He backed toward the others with the air of a "cock of the walk"—as if he had not just razzle-dazzled them with the cheapest kind of a cheap trick!

When Bob had told Jack outside that

the long-whiskered freak was from some show, he had full reason for the conviction.

In handling the knife which the pursuer of Castelar had abandoned, Bob had made a singular discovery.

It was real enough in appearance, it was positively murderous looking, and, "set," it was a dangerous weapon.

For all that, it was a "fake" knife, a "stage-stabber"—it had two uses.

A snap so operated it that a spring took the place of the haft plate.

Unset, the blade would seemingly penetrate what it struck, but in reality it would run way back into the hollow handle.

The cap of this handle was a steel rim, which, placed over the point of the knife, was not at a distance visible, and prevented its sharp edges from cutting.

All this Bob had found out, and this double utility of the knife he had brought into play to save Jack Burton's life while seeming to take it.

A twist of the handle after that last blow had caught a tiny hook intended for such use in the filaments of Jack's coat, and thus the semblance had been carried out that it was buried hilt deep in his heart.

Such a knife Bob knew was used only by a conjurer or a tragedian.

To some show, therefore, he decided the man with the long beard at some time belonged.

He wondered what had become of him—he wished he could get an inkling of the cause of his tragic hatred of Castelar.

Other anxieties, however, attended these.

Bob felt sure that Jack would find a way of gaining his liberty.

Before his mystifying resurrection was discovered, however, he, Bob, must work actively.

Before the real bearer of the card that had admitted him to this den should revive, tell his story and reveal Bob as an impostor, the latter must learn something more tangible of the real plots of Castelar, and get outside to put the machinery in motion to run them down.

Bob sauntered about the room exchanging a word now and then with the others, endeavoring to secure a friendly and con-

fidential basis with them, so that he could get on the road toward learning what he wished to know.

Busy picking up the papers in the disturbed cupboard, Castelar was too engaged to notice him much.

Perhaps half an hour had gone by, when there came a sudden divertisement in the monotony of the scene.

The fellow who had admitted Bob came to the door of the inner room.

He approached Castelar, who had just finished sorting and parceling the scattered documents.

"Some one to see you," spoke the former.

"Who?"

The man spoke a name Bob did not catch.

"All right—let him in," directed Castelar. "I'll be there in a minute."

Some one was admitted from outside.

Castelar hastened to the other apartment in a minute or two.

Bob gave a glance over at the scene of the recent "tragedy."

Jack was still "a lay figure" in the tableau, however.

He had not moved, but Bob guessed shrewdly that he was watching keenly from a peep corner of the counterpane for signs of a clear coast.

About to turn to the door and find out who the new arrival might be, Bob drew to a standstill with a shock.

Queer things had happened in this queer den of mystery during the past hour, but the queerest now transpired to his fixed gaze.

He had told Jack of a trap or break in the floor he had noticed directly over the spot where he lay.

This trap Bob now saw move.

Its vicinity, out of direct range of the lamplight, was dim and shadowy and had he not been straining his gaze to make out Jack, Bob would not have noticed what he did.

The trap moved slowly, slid back with caution.

A face hovered.

It was that of the man with the phenomenal beard, and he was staring squarely down at Jack Burton.

CHAPTER VI.

UP A STRANGE LADDER.

Bob discerned that all the elements of a startling climax were due to soon materialize.

Castelar was doubly shadowed—by personal hate, by justice.

Bob fancied that the long-bearded man pressed his face far down as he dared, that he spoke.

'To Jack?

Bob took an involuntary step toward the dim corner.

He imagined, further, that he saw Jack's form move—the far side of the counterpane seemed to lift.

And then, as he was putting this and that circumstance together and guessing that the bearded man might prove their friend and ally because he was Castelar's enemy, a hand touched his shoulder.

The fellow who guarded the outside door faced Bob as he turned.

"Want you out there," he vouchsafed.

"Who wants me?"

"Castelar."

"All right."

Bob sauntered to the door. He keenly noticed a sinister-faced man conversing engrossedly with Castelar.

"The last arrival," soliloquized Bob. "Wonder who he is?"

"Yes, as I was saying," the man was remarking, "I picked Purvis out as a good man for your scheme—glad he's shown his grit."

"Oh, he's the right kind. Here he is now."

Bob's nerves gave a jump as Castelar turned to him with the words.

"Who is here?" demanded Castelar's companion, staring first at Bob and then beyond him.

"Why, your man."

"Eh?"

"Purvis."

"Where?"

There dawned upon Castelar what had been apparent to Bob two sentences earlier.

He scanned his visitor's face to see if he was in earnest.

Then a dark suspicion ringed his lips as he glared at Bob.

The latter, outwardly cool as a cucumber, was fomenting with dismal auguries.

"Isn't this your man?" asked Castelar, drawing his brows into a scowl.

"Never saw him before."

"Is that your card?" pursued Castelar, producing the one Bob had appropriated and presented.

"It is."

"Where did you get it?" demanded Castelar of the impostor.

Bob was squarely faced.

If he had not been backed as well, by the curious, peering other denizens of the place, attracted by Castelar's sharp inquisition, he might have made a rush for Jack, preparatory to a bid for a bold up-and-down defiance.

"I picked it up," answered Bob, promptly.

"Where?"

"Outside."

"How did you know it was intended for here?" demanded Castelar.

"Oh, I guessed it."

"You're good at guessing!"

"They tell me so."

Castelar tried to cower Bob with a glance, but was himself the first to flinch.

"In other words," he said, sternly, "you're a fraud!"

"I seemed to suit you a bit back?"

"What brought you here?"

"I wanted to join the Cuban patriots, I guess," hazarded Bob.

The break was an ominous one—Bob almost literally repeated Jack Burton's declaration.

"Two of them!" hissed a voice in the group behind him.

"Yes, and there may be twenty!" shouted Castelar. "We're not safe—bring him here."

Bob read a dread purpose, impelled by fear, anger and excitement, in Castelar's face.

He had backed to a machine Bob had noticed when he first entered the place.

It was the paper cutter. Stored there temporarily, out of use, or owned by some of the crowd as an adjunct to surreptitious or inflammatory literature, it was not so old-fashioned or so dusty or rusty as to be harmless or useless.

As Castelar turned the wheel at its side, as the great long four-inch blade moved slowly upward, Bob saw that it was bright, sharp, destructive.

"Bring him here, I say!" shouted Castelar, in a frenzied sort of a way.

Two of the strongest of the crowd had seized Bob and urged him forward.

"Force his hand through here!" raved Castelar. "I won't be hounded, bothered, baffled!"

Bob's nerves crept as he read the fell purpose of the infuriated villain.

"You steady him, you come on the other side and hold his hand squarely under that knife," followed the sinister direction.

Bob was helpless, in the grasp of his enemies.

Pulled half over the back plate of the paper cutter, held there by one pair of strong arms, his hand dragged under the blade and imprisoned in the iron grasp beyond it, Bob faced the open doorway looking into the inner room.

His wrist, bared by the tugging pressure, showed the freshly imprinted brand of the gang he had elected to "join."

Castelar, his touch on the wheel, glared at this.

"It would do to turn him loose with that, wouldn't it?" he hailed his mates shrilly. "Why, that's evidence!"

"Should say so!" muttered a gruff, uncompromising voice.

"That hand comes off!"

"His head ought to!"

"It's our property, that brand—he stole it, he secured it by misrepresentation—didn't he, now?"

There was a quaver in Castelar's voice. Morally he was a coward, and he was trying to brace himself with excuses.

Killing one captive, maiming another, with a mysterious avenger hovering on his trail—these thoughts unmanned him.

"Give it the twist!" growled ferocious tones.

"You are making a mistake!" broke in Bob.

He felt it almost useless to attempt evasion or explanation, but his hand was worth temporizing for.

"Yes, certainly!" snarled a jeerer—"let him go free with our private trade mark. Lots of business we'll do, then!"

"It's got to be!" hissed Castelar from between his set lips.

"Let 'er go!"

A sickening qualm oppressed Bob.

The miscreant gave the wheel a turn.

It carried the knife to its highest point, ready for the descent.

Castelar seized the operating wheel that would reverse the pressure.

Bob saw the blade move—he could not resist a desperate struggle.

His captors held him firmly—the deadly, glittering menace advanced closer—closer.

“Say—look!”

Bob felt the man behind let go suddenly.

The words were a shout of such wild import that every person in the room followed the indication of his wavering finger, pointing through the doorway of the next room.

Bob had a clear view, the way he faced.

“It’s him!” almost shrieked Castelar, and fell back as if struck with a sledge.

Bob gave one bewildered gasp.

At the end of the next apartment where he had last observed Jack Burton, the strangest, weirdest scene was in progress that he had ever witnessed.

Through the trap where he had recently discovered the man with the long beard, that mystic individual still hovered.

He had dropped his whiskers.

Lying face down, he had let them fall till they swept the floor of the apartment below.

And, scaling this strange ladder of safety, running up this extraordinary life line like a sailor, Jack Burton was making good his escape!

CHAPTER VII.

TEETERING ON THE BRINK!

In absolute craven dread, shaking like a leaf, Castelar, fallen back nerveless, glared at the scene that now riveted every eye.

His associates were transfixed—there was something eerie in the white, gleaming face at the trap, the trailing jet black beard, the victim of three savage knife thrusts nimbly sealing it.

Slam!

The trap closed while the crowd goggled.

Jack had disappeared—the beard, its owner, faded from view like some unique picture.

The echoes of the dropping cover seemed to startle the throng into action.

All but Castelar—his abject fear was almost pitiable.

“Get me away!” he panted.

“Brace up, man!” spoke the last arrival.

“It is he—the enemy, the vendetta!”

“Afraid of a man——”

“A fiend, rather! He has traced me over two continents, he——”

“It is open!” interrupted a quick voice, and Bob saw that a door in a corner at which the doorkeeper had been working had been forced with some difficulty.

“Find him—kill him! the man with the long beard!” quavered Castelar, “and take—all my share of our enterprise. Anything, everything—but save me from him!”

“Care for this one!” cried the doorkeeper, indicating Bob—“we’ll find the others.”

There was a rush for the doorway, a clatter up the stairs.

Bob half crouched by the paper cutter.

Amid the excitement every man had left the room except Castelar.

Bob saw him make a dart for a wardrobe, and as he swung its door open a perfect armament of weapons was revealed.

Concerned first in equipping himself for defense against the mysterious person he so dreaded, Castelar thus afforded Bob a moment of perfect freedom.

Bob improved it.

He ran at the door leading outside—it was of double thickness, doubly locked, and the keys were in possession of the keeper.

For a second Bob wavered, as he was half-minded to pursue the avenue of progress up the stairs just opened by the searchers for the bearded man and Jack.

Then a chance discovery influenced Bob to a more complicated but apparently feasible method of escape.

Jack either was not aware of the discovery of his imposture, or would plan to reach him after he had made his own liberty sure.

To join Jack and his strange rescuer would certainly be to score the very best point possible.

Along the floor on one side of the room Bob noticed a step-ladder.

It was light, and he caught it up and scurried through the doorway leading into the next room with a bound.

He had reached the farther end of that apartment, had planted the ladder directly under the trap-door apparently before the engrossed Castelar had completed his selection of weapons, for only as Bob ran up the steps was there a quick ejaculation from the outside room.

"Open!" shouted Bob, tapping vigorously.

He pressed head and shoulders against the trap.

"Jack—Jack!"

There was the sound of a bolt withdrawn.

"Up with you!"

"Capital!"

The trap opened—Bob was pulled through.

The trap closed—to dull the echoes of a baffled cry beneath.

It was dark all about them, Bob felt his arm clasped, and stood still.

"Is he here, Jack?" he whispered.

"The man with the long beard?—yes."

"Those fellows are coming upstairs——"

"This way, then," broke in a harsh, cracked voice that Bob guessed belonged to the man they had just been discussing—"take my hand."

"Keep hold of mine," spoke Jack to his comrade.

"Can we trust him?"

"Don't it look it, so far?" retorted Jack.

There were various alarming sounds all about them, but Bob trusted to Jack's guidance, and he to the leader in advance.

The latter seemed to know where he was going, for he made no halt.

It was wind, turn, up a stairs, down a stairs, across roomy spaces, through narrow ones, and Bob wondered where it would all end.

"Thus far!" suddenly spoke their guide.

"Hello!" Bob heard Jack mutter under his breath.

"What is it?"

"He has left us."

"Why?"

"To study out a further course, I suppose—hark! He's in another room, fumbling at a padlock. Some one is coming!"

"Some one?—a mob!" breathed Bob.

Voices, footsteps ascending noisily, told Bob that the fellows from below had guessed their course of flight.

"Trust to your own wits, now—I am blocked—a door had been padlocked since I was last here," rang out the voice of their late guide in the darkness.

"And you?" shot out Jack.

"I will meet you outside, as agreed."

"If we get outside!" muttered Bob.

"We must," interrupted Jack, "and rejoin this man. He can post us on Castelar. One flare, Bob—the tiniest, but enough to show if a break is possible."

A match snapped—eyes ready, the twain took in their environment in a flash.

"A door, just ahead!" both exclaimed, and both put for it.

"They're coming up the stairs—fast!" commented Jack.

"Spring lock to this door," reported Bob, fumbling—"I've got it open, but——"

"Out we go, then!"

"No—no! Jack, it opens on—nothingness!"

"Eh? Say! they're coming right into this room."

Under the crack of the door at the end of the room where they had entered it moving light was visible.

"Step out, then—careful, Jack! There's a threshold—six inches of it, a void beyond and below."

"Why——"

"Squeeze close."

"Shut the door, quick!"

An abyss yawned before them—the advancing uproar of pursuit hovered behind.

Bob guessed where they were—on the outside edge of the doorway whence the light had been flashed down upon him when he had first entered the place.

"What kind of a joint are we in, anyway?" interrogated Jack.

"A shell, a building with its entire interior torn away," explained Bob. "Hold

steady, Jack! if you go an inch over you go fifty feet down!"

"Whew! and you've shut the door on us?"

"Yes."

"Then we're locked out!"

"S-sh!"

Bob paid less attention to the sounds behind them than the prospect in advance.

Their pursuers were now in the room they had just left.

Bob heard the doorkeeper's strident tones ordering this and that one how to proceed in scouring the entire floor for a trace of the fugitives.

Even if not discovered here, it would be difficult to force the door, and that would bring them back into the den again.

Bob tried to remember the door into the frame of which he and his comrade now squeezed themselves, as he had seen it in that momentary glance from below two hours previous.

"Jack," he whispered, "it seems to me a plank crossed from here."

"Where to?"

"It ran to the opposite wall, I guess."

"To another door?"

"Likely."

Bob felt around with his foot.

"I am right," he declared. "Here's the end of a plank, square set, but firmly set, on the threshold."

"Narrow?"

"Moderately."

"Go ahead!"

"Shall we try it?"

"We've got to try something."

Bob planted both feet cautiously on the plank.

He was certain that it was a pathway to some aperture in the opposite wall, though probably only used in case of emergency.

He began creeping along it carefully. At its centre he made the discovery that it rested on an iron stringer running lengthwise of the structure.

He passed this. Then more cautiously than ever he advanced.

"Right!" breathed Bob as he came against the opposite wall—"the ledge of some aperture, door or window."

He felt over the frame that fitted it.

"No knob, set solid," he continued. "If it wasn't so dark——"

Bob reflected deeply for a few seconds. He felt in his pockets for his match safe.

It was not there. By some misadventure he had left it in the room they had just abandoned.

He rapped a low query on the board, understood by Jack across the chasm, although to one uninitiated it would have sounded as nothing more suspicious than the tapping of a sparrow's bill:

"Got any matches?"

Back came the telegraph code signal of Nick Carter's detective school, disappointingly prompt:

"No."

Bob ransacked his pockets. He felt rich as he found one solitary lucifer.

"The last match!" he tapped out.

It flared. It was a risk, but they must see their environment, if only for an instant.

Bob looked down, somewhat daunted.

A drop that distance was not to be thought of.

"Out with it!" sounded sharply in startling tappings.

Bob blew out the match. What was up?

He heard Jack's feet drop to the plank and the timber vibrated.

A click behind him, a rasping jerk next sounded forth.

A flood of light penetrated the darksome void.

The door back of Jack had opened suddenly.

"Hel-lo!" yauped a starrer.

The man who had discovered Bob as an impostor filled the threshold.

He stared, ran back for the lamp, and wonderingly regarded Bob standing on the other end of the plank. Jack started to cross from his clutches.

"Two of them!" he began—"sure trap!"

"Stop!" shouted Bob, appalled at a sudden movement of the man.

The latter gave the plank end a kick, a foot push.

It was so forcible that as the plank shied free of the threshold the man almost lost his balance.

To preserve it, he had to drop the lamp.

It hurtled below, going on before it crashed to the ground.

In the darkness, Bob Ferret took a dizzying swing.

Jack dropped to his knees to escape a tumble.

The plank swept free of all end support.

It went tilting, sliding, oscillating like an evenly balanced teeter.

Those two swung on that frail, dizzying perch in mid-air.

"Jack!"

"Bob!"

"Hold firm!"

"Drop!"

In breathless excitement, Nick Carter's young detectives felt as if their lives hung on the merest thread.

The plank was swaying to a grinding curve where it might tip sideways—then both were lost.

Suddenly, Bob, clinging, felt himself lift.

As abruptly, Jack, clinging also, felt himself drop.

With a rush, overweighted by some delicate veer of balance, the plank started sliding.

It dove like a log in a boom—it ran across the shivering girder like a saw.

Each had to think for himself—suggestions, directions would be confusing now, even if time were afforded for their utterance.

With a shock Jack was momentarily halted.

The other end of the plank, passing the girder, had caught for an instant where broken spike ends protruded.

The stoppage shot Bob head over heels—he scrambled, held, slid, slipped, and just as the timber grazed free again, and was then halted stationary, he landed against the rafters of the lower story.

"Bob!"

His name was uttered in sharp anxiety, announcing that Jack had landed in safety.

He came creeping over the floorless stairs, one of which had caught the plank and now held it on an incline.

"You're all right?" he queried,

eagerly, groping his way to his companion's side.

Bob was sitting up. Jack helped to lift him erect.

"Got a fearful twist on one ankle," explained Bob.

"Stand it till we're out of this,"

Jack helped his comrade drop to the bare cellar floor beneath. They came out at the same aperture that Bob had entered earlier in the evening.

Bob was limping. As they reached the outside he sat down, rubbing his crippled limb.

He looked up quickly, and Jack gave a start as a whistle sounded out.

"Why!" exclaimed Bob, "that's one of our——"

"Signal calls? yes."

"Who——"

"The man with the long beard."

"You mean——"

"I gave him my whistle. He has got outside."

"And is waiting for you?"

"Looks that way."

"Try and find him!"

"And you?"

"I've got to take it easy for a few minutes. Go on. There it is again—quick and sharp."

Jack sped away. Bob pulled himself up against the shadowed edge of the building.

He could not run for the present, and he would simply be a hamper to Jack.

In fact, Bob doubted if he could walk without pain, for one limb had received a terrible knock in his violent landing.

He listened intently to various rapid, echoing sounds in the building of slamming doors and hurried trappings.

Then all was silent. Bob arose to his feet, limping slightly.

He turned the corner of the building around which Jack had gone, but halted abruptly.

He had come right on the door which had first admitted him to the den.

Some one was knocking at it.

Tap—tap—tap—persuasively.

Rap—rap—rap—sharply.

Bang!—aggressively.

Bob followed these stages of an urgent application for admittance with some curiosity.

He had made out the late visitor.

It was the man whom he had discovered intoxicated at just this spot on his first arrival.

The fellow was unsteady in gait even now, but he had got sober enough to remember that he had business at this place.

"Open door!" he growled, and he kicked it.

Bob determined to centre his attention and interest on this fellow for the present.

If there came no response to the summons, it would seem that the conspirators had abandoned the den.

If this were true, Jack and the man with the long beard might have already departed on their trail.

"Smash 'er to flinders, if yer don't open!" shouted the man, getting mad.

He hammered an angry tattoo with his fists.

"Won't be 'sulted—expected here! Came with card. Lost card, but this me—Purvis."

The fellow braced back a step or two.

"Hear me?" he demanded. "Open door! Won't? Very well. Take squonsequences, then!"

He staggered back—stooping, looking for something, he fell quite over as he reached for a stone.

It was big as a plate and quite heavy.

"I'll soon see," Bob heard him mutter.

He again approached the stubborn door and tapped gently.

"Viva Cuba!" he called persuasively.

"Viva Cuba!" he fairly roared, receiving no answer. "Open that door! I'll give you away! I won't be shut out!"

He raised the stone.

"I'll let it out!" declared the irritated fellow. "I'll get even! Viva Cuba—nit!"

"Nit?" muttered Bob.

The man had let the stone drive.

It rebounded, taking him in the head.

He fell back, spinning around—he tumbled to the ground with a groan.

"Yessir! give it away!" he maundered, his senses half-stunned. "Viva Cuba—nit! I'll blow the racket—the gold ship!"

"What!" cried Bob Ferret, starting up magically.

In a pounce he was on the man.

Those words were stimulating.

A hint, a suspicion, had this frazzled

end of the combination given the first tangible clue to the real motives of the pretended Cuban patriot, Castelar, in those three impressive words:

The gold ship!

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE GOLD SHIP."

"That's it, Jack."

"The gold ship, Bob?"

"No, but the nearest thing to it that I can strike."

It was twenty-four hours after the visit of Nick Carter's two young detectives to the den of Castelar, the Cuban "patriot."

They stood now on the edge of a desolate, deserted river slip viewing a craft, half-tug, half-steamer, lying moored there.

It was a conspicuous vessel, for a foot-wide line around the hull, the wheel house, and the great bulkhead terminating in an immense winged bird, well painted a fresh, glaring white.

"The Pelican," read Jack—"no one seems aboard."

"No, nor around," supplemented Bob, "so, let's count up the prospects and make a move."

"My prospects have all faded into nothingness," asserted Jack. "I missed the man with the long beard—Castelar and his crowd vanished from that den as if they were spirits."

"And that drunken fellow woke up from his hard knock so closely on the verge of delirium tremens that I couldn't get ten sensible words out of him," said Bob.

"You still incline to the idea, though, that the scheme Castelar is working on is the 'gold ship'?" insinuated Jack.

"I do—that fellow meant something—he babbled it over and over; derision of the Cuban patriot idea, the intensest anxiety to 'get next' to the gold ship deal. Why, Jack! what does that scrap of paper you found in Castelar's cupboard say?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars—and a date."

"To-morrow?"

"Yes."

"Jack, we haven't found the key to this mysterious business yet, but that

sum, and the gold ship, and Castelar's plots hinge on one pivot, believe me."

"The real filibustering crowd don't seem to know anything about a gold ship?"

"But they do, and they affect ignorance—because it's one of their secrets. I trailed some of them all day—four of them came at different intervals right to this boat."

"What for?"

"I don't know."

"Bringing gold?"

"Not likely, and leave it unguarded. No, this is not their 'gold ship,' but I feel a decided conviction that it has something to do with it—that a mysterious voyage is on the tapis, and—I'm going to keep my eye on it."

"Believing that, mixed up with it, is some criminal plot of Castelar's?"

"Precisely."

"Meantime, getting a look under hatches to see what it holds?"

"You've got it."

"Come ahead."

Jack boarded the ship and made a tour of its deck.

Bob remained at the wharf watching out for visitors.

"No one aboard," reported the former, reappearing.

"Everything locked up?"

"Except a ventilating hatch."

"Big enough to get through?"

"Into the hold, yes."

"Let us make an inspection."

"I was going to suggest just that."

Jack piloted his comrade to the aperture. Both squeezed through.

Bob lit his dark lantern as they dropped to the hold of the craft.

He flared it about curiously and then disappointedly:

"Nothing here!" he muttered.

The hold was indeed empty except for two newly painted water casks and a heap of lump coal.

"If the cabins don't produce something better than this," said Bob, "we're certainly on a wrong lead."

"Not even a stack of contraband arms!" spoke Jack.

"And yet this craft is due to sail on an important sea voyage before daylight—I

know that much positively," declared Bob.

"The Cubans running it?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll inspect the cabins——"

"I rather think not!"

"Eh?"

"Douse the glim!"

"Why——"

"Some one is coming—hear that?"

"Voices—a key in the lock at the head of those stairs!" muttered Jack with a start. "Up through the little hatch, Bob!"

"It's flopped shut—too high to reach in a hurry, and—hide!"

"Where?"

"In with you!"

Bob ran to one of the water butts.

Jack made no demur. He bounded over into it.

Bob shot the slide of his lantern, leaped in beside him, and the cover shut down on them.

"Now, then!" muttered Jack, fixing his eyes on the row of holes running just under the rim of the cask.

"A light—two men, Jack!"

"Bob!"

"It's him!"

The last two words formed a chorus-ing breath.

The rays of a lantern glinted down a pair of stairs.

The man who bore the lantern was Castelar.

He was disguised, but there were certain peculiarities of manner, an expression to his keen, restless eyes, not easy to forget.

"We've come here to some purpose," whispered the peering Bob.

"It looks that way," admitted Jack.

"The other fellow is the man who unmasked me in the den—nearly cost me my hand."

"What's he got in his?"

"Jack, it's an auger!"

"And he's boring with it!"

"Here's a mystery for you!"

Every movement engaged in for the next five minutes was startlingly mysterious.

Castelar's companion began boring holes through the bottom of the hull.

Castelar himself went up on deck while

he was thus engaged, and the lurkers heard a sound like the jangling of metal objects.

He came down carrying a bag. His assistant, looking up from the fifth or sixth hole he had bored, regarded him questioningly.

"I've fixed the machinery," announced Castelar.

"Have?"

"Unscrewed what can't be duplicated under twenty-four hours."

"What you done with them?"

"Dropped them overboard."

"That'll do. Holes enough?"

"The water is coming in now—on a run she'd fill in a few hours. One more, right amidships, here," directed Castelar.

He emptied the contents of the sack on the floor.

Bob tried to guess what the square lumps were that rolled out in a heap.

They resembled pieces of coal, and into the coal heap Castelar proceeded to toss them.

His companion pulled up his auger from a finished hole and took up the lantern.

Then he paused, and fixed his eyes alternately with a calculating gleam in their depths first on the coal heap and then on Castelar.

"Look here," he said; "why not make a good job of it?"

"A good job?"

"Yes."

"What do you call this?"

"Sure discovery, when the crowd arrives, in an hour."

"That don't matter, so it holds them back."

"Will it hinder them? they may be able to mend up the machinery quicker than you think."

"That's so!"

"And baling and plugging is no heavy task."

"Then——"

"I've got a fuse!"

Castelar gave a start. His lips twitched thoughtfully.

"Go it!" he muttered.

"Isn't it best?"

"It's surest—only if they suspect?"

"They can't stop the gold ship, can they?"

"No," answered Castelar, consulting his watch, "it sailed two hours since."

"Hear that!" muttered Bob in a startled whisper to his companion.

"See that!" retorted Jack.

Castelar's companion drew a long, sinuous object from his pocket.

"A fuse!" murmured Bob.

"He's lit it!" added Jack.

"That stuff he put in the coal——"

"Powder!"

"Sure as you live!"

"To blow up the boiler, but they changed their minds!"

Fizz!

A splutter as the man lit a match caused him to hurry after Castelar.

Both disappeared up the stairs, and the hatch cover came down with a slam.

"Out!" shouted Bob—"there's destruction here!"

"And work!" urged Jack. "You were right. The gold ship! We mustn't lose sight of these fellows for a single instant."

"Whew!"

"The mischief!"

"We're——"

"Locked in!"

"It can't be possible!"

A startling proposition confronted the two lurkers unexpectedly.

Bob had just casually noticed when he opened and shut the cask that two encompassing hinge straps ran over the front, acting as hasps.

These must have come down with a force sufficiently sudden to snap them over the staples.

At all events, they could force the cover up by no ordinary pressure.

Bob tried to poke out with a knife blade and push the straps free.

"I say! this is serious!" interrupted his unavailing efforts.

A fiery splutter over near the coal flared out an ominous warning.

"Rock!" directed Jack.

In unison the two tried to give the cask a forward and backward motion.

It began swinging, then——

Thud—bang!

An explosion had taken place in the coal heap.

"Over!" cried Bob.

Head following heels, both went.

Hiss—bang!

A shower of bursted coal lumps following a second explosion rained over the two refugees as the force of the tip-over loosened the hasps.

They rolled out and made a run for the stairs down which Castelar and his companion had come.

The hatch cover had fortunately been left unlocked by those worthies in the urgency of their flight.

A terrific concussion lifted it, and the two young detectives.

They were fairly blown through it, and a broad sheet of flame followed them.

"Get ashore!" panted Jack.

"The craft is doomed."

"Run!"

A series of alarming reports echoed from the confined hold.

The fugitives got out of reach of danger.

"We've lost track of those men," lamented Jack.

"Too bad! but— isn't that one of them?"

"Where?"

"Put, Jack!"

A little ahead, lurking along in the shadows in a decidedly furtive and sinister way, was a man.

They sped after him. Almost up to him, he turned, saw that they were making for him, and changed his rapid walk to a run.

"Hold on!" cried Bob.

A flare from the burning craft had shot across the man's face.

"We know you!" hailed Jack.

The man turned again and viewed them sharply, retreating the while, however.

"You know me? yes," he spoke slowly.

It was the man with the phenomenal beard.

"Were you—there?" he inquired, pointing to the burning boat.

Jack nodded a quick assent.

"And Castelar?"

"He came—we got shut into a water cask——"

"I saw him."

"And did not follow him!"

"It was not necessary," remarked the bearded man quite calmly.

"He is bound on some deep scheme to-night——"

"I know."

"He will get away!"

"Not from me!"

Both the young detectives were somewhat surprised at the change in the man's speech and actions.

His fiery impetuosity had given place to calmness—too ominous, however, to be natural.

"I have changed my mind," he said.

"Indeed?" projected Bob.

"I shall not kill him—yet."

"Must you at all?"

"It is sworn!—but there is a surer revenge."

"What?"

"To rob him of every victory—to punish his friends as well. I did not follow him now, because—I know where to find him."

"Lead us to him——" began Bob, eagerly.

"Certainly," bowed the bearded man with surprising promptness, "for we are mutually interested. I want this man's life—you his secret."

"Has he one?"

"Come and see."

The man with the long beard led the two young detectives beyond the ship and down the shore nearly a mile.

At a spot more lonely and secluded, if possible, than that where they had discovered the Pelican, he struck out behind rows and rows of crates, lining a deck head high.

"Follow me, with these as a shield," he directed.

"Look!" he added, coming to where there was a gap in the mountains of merchandise.

Moored at other side of the dock was a craft, a sight of which made Bob rub his eyes, and Jack look twice in a puzzled, startled way.

"The dence!" aspirated the latter.

"The Pelican!" cried Bob.

Before them—the same in name, in size, in appearance, in color—the exact prototype, to the minutest particular, of the boat they had just seen burned at its dock less than a mile distant!

CHAPTER IX.

A TRIPLE ALLIANCE.

Bob was too shrewd a guesser to be long mystified by the unexpected revelation of the moment.

"Two Pelicans?" muttered Jack, thoughtfully.

"What's the scheme?" inquired the former.

"I don't know," confessed the bearded man. "You see for yourself, however—this boat is a precise counterpart of the other."

"You don't know why?"

"But it is easily found out."

"By going with these fellows? exactly," said Bob, "and no other way."

"We want to decide quick," put in Jack.

"Yes, they are getting ready to start," declared their guide.

"For the gold ship—wherever or whatever that is," murmured Jack.

"Each one find his way—when the time comes to claim Castelar's life and unearth Castelar's secret, you will have in me a helper," spoke the bearded man, almost solemnly.

"It's too late to stop them," said Bob.

"And not easy to steal aboard," calculated Jack.

"We'll have to do it some way."

"I'll make my try."

Everything was brisk and lively about the craft.

A wagon clattered down the dock, and delivered a miscellaneous load.

The trio separated. Bob climbed over a tier of barrels, got within a few feet of the new Pelican, and studied its crew closely.

He stared hard as he saw Jack deliberately walking from the wagon that had arrived across a plank running to the deck of the boat.

His comrade had affected a marvelous change in his appearance within two minutes time, and resembled some stevedore.

He was carrying a box on his shoulder. This he dumped, and went coolly back for another load, repeating his visit to the deck.

Bob stared harder than ever at the next bold movement of his audacious friend.

Jack had been watching an expected opportunity.

He found it in the fact that the forward part of the boat was practically deserted just at that moment.

He glided across it, glanced sharply all around, and sprang upward.

A low mast ran up, supporting a loosely coiled sail, used only in extraordinary stress of wind and weather.

Into its folds Jack Burton flopped—enveloped.

"I won't be beat!" soliloquized Bob stanchly. "Is that a show?"

It was easy enough to get aboard the craft in the confusion, bustle and darkness.

The thing was to find a safe hiding place.

Bob fancied he discovered one, as one of the crew unpacked a lot of coarse kitchen linen from a narrow, round, closely-woven basket fully six feet high.

He emptied it, brought out a dozen or two soiled towels, thrust them into the basket, and gave it a kick that sent it rolling between two rail posts, snug and out of the way.

Bob manœuvred with skill and caution to reach the deck and that basket.

He looked closely to see that his revolver was in good order before he did so.

The exploit was no common one, if the stake these men were playing for was a gold ship carrying two hundred thousand dollars.

Bob wished he knew a little more about the scheme, but the issue was forced of instantaneous action.

He ensconced himself in the basket unseen, just as he had observed Jack hide himself in the sail overhead.

What had become of the man with the long beard he did not know, but he believed he would redeem his promise to be on hand when the hour for decisive action came.

The craft started up in half an hour, steaming along at a very fair rate.

Clear of the harbor, the various members of the crew relaxed their duties.

Some went below, some sat spinning yarns at the side, two came to where a big chest stood, looked down into it, and began discussing its contents.

These seemed to comprise a motley assortment of weapons.

Finally, one of the fellows drew out a long sword.

"Regular pirate kit, that!" he laughed. "Here's an old-fashioned bread-cutter. There's another. I used to be some at fencing."

"I'm no slouch at it now," vaunted the other.

"That so? Suppose we try?"

"Suppose we do."

The two began a sharp bout. One of them got a sliding cut across the hand.

"Drat your clumsiness," he growled.

"That ain't clumsiness—that's skill," laughed his adversary.

"Humph!"

"Ugh!"

It was Bob who echoed the ejaculation, and almost audibly.

The man had thrust the sword into the basket as if it was a sheath.

It so narrowly skipped Bob's nose as it ran clean through the yielding willow meshes, that it took his breath away.

"Tell one of the other fellows to come here—I'm more at this than I guessed," spoke the champion.

He started to take off his coat as the other moved away to obey his instructions.

Then, the sword hampering, he made a move to seek a resting sheath for the weapon as his late adversary had done.

Bob could see through the basket interstices—he shriveled up, hugging himself close.

The sword point crisped through the beginning of the meshes, but instantly fell clanging to the deck.

"Ouch!" sang out the fellow, putting his hand to his eye.

He had got some tiny but stinging projectile right in the optic, and Bob glanced from whom—watchful Jack overhead.

The intervention was followed by immense relief for Bob.

He was saved from being spitted by the fact that just then Castelar came on deck.

The swordsman hastily drew one weapon free from the basket at this, and picking up the other, tossed them into the chest and walked away.

Castelar was accompanied by the man who had visited the real Pelican with him.

The latter seemed to be his close confidant and partner in the enterprise.

They came up to the rail, leaning over it and conversing so near to Bob that at one time Castelar's foot moved the basket he was in.

"Where's the torpedo?" asked Castelar's companion.

"In the cabin."

"You won't use it?"

"Not unless I have to."

"And the Gatling gun?"

"It will be in place right here when the time comes."

Bob began to guess there was some method in Castelar's wanting "fighters and stayers!"

"Oh, there'll be no rumpus," declared Castelar's companion.

"We don't know that."

"Take 'em by surprise."

"If we can—that's the scheme, but it may fail."

"With half the hands on the gold ship asleep?"

Bob strained his hearing, for here a shift of the craft caused the wind to bear the sounds of the conversation away from him.

He caught fragments, half sentences, words that were enlightening, for all that, however.

As, five minutes later, the two plotters moved away, Bob uttered an explosive, expressive:

"Well!"

He knew what they were after now—what the gold ship was, and why and what their interest in it.

"The gold ship" was a schooner chartered secretly by the real Cuban sympathizers.

It had sailed from port earlier that evening—a modest-appearing grain bearer for Philadelphia.

In reality, it was stored with arms and ammunition for the Cuban insurgents.

Besides this, in its cabin were twenty boxes of specie—nearly two hundred thousand dollars—in gold.

This, contributed by ardent sympathizers to the patriot cause, was to be used in Cuba to pay the penniless native soldiers.

To secure this the pretended patriot Castelar was running his present scheme.

The real Pelican was to have steamed out of the harbor a few hours after the gold ship, take it up as a tow, and run for Cuban shores past danger of pursuit.

Aware of all these details, the cunning Castelar had fitted up a prototype of the Pelican.

He was now on his way to secure the treasure aboard of the gold ship at all hazards, and disappear, a vile, treacherous scoundrel, but a rich man.

About him he had gathered fellows of his own ilk, every one of whom, Bob voted, would cut a throat for a dollar.

Bob remained in his safe covert because he could see no point in leaving it until something new materialized, and because some one was continually passing to and fro on the deck.

It must have been two hours later when from an extra hustle on board, snatches of conversation and a display of signal lights, he knew that the gold ship had been sighted.

He could not see beyond the rail, but he knew further, a little later, that the Pelican had taken the schooner in tow.

For two hours all was quiet aboard.

Then action began suddenly, startlingly.

Castelar and his main partner came on deck, followed by all hands.

There were hurried conversations, low-voiced orders.

"Are we running close?" some one asked of Castelar.

"Yes. Be ready, all."

Castelar was leaning over the side.

Suddenly there was a strain, a jerk.

"Cut loose!" spoke Castelar.

The towing rope astern must have been severed, for the craft gave quite a forward lurch.

A jar echoed—a subdued crash.

"We've got her!" muttered Castelar.

Bob Ferret thrilled.

He guessed that the culminating moment had arrived.

The crisis hovered—what shape could the action of Nick Carter's two young detectives take?

The gold ship had been guided on the rocks, and had struck!

CHAPTER X.

QUICK PLAY!

Bob Ferret got ready for action.

Amid the noise and confusion around, he ventured one of those low-blending whistle signals that he knew would be understood by Jack Burton.

From the sail above there sounded a return call so faint and floating, that from the uninitiated it would attract no attention, possess no startling nor suspicious interest.

Bob was ready, Jack was ready, for what might come—what of the man with the long beard?

He had not shown up in any guise, by any token, and Bob wondered if he had got aboard the craft at all.

By the movements of the same and words he caught here and there, Bob traced the plans of the pirate conspirators.

What they accomplished they effected quickly, for the steamer finally came alongside the grounded schooner.

Castelar and every man on board left the steamer except two.

These were the engineer and Castelar's partner.

They rolled forward into place a Gatling gun, planting it directly at the front of the forward cabin.

The engineer then reappeared from below bearing a spindle-shaped affair with wire clamps at one end and wire wound round and round it.

"I'm to slide around in the yawl and attack this to the schooner's hull," he remarked.

"Yes, ready to leave 'no trace' if Castelar gives the word. They're doing the job quietly."

"It seems so."

Bob had got out his knife, had cut the end of the basket so he could see, so he could drive it free with a push.

"A torpedo!" he muttered, as the engineer moved astern.

The man paused to place it on a cask while he buttoned up his pea jacket.

"On hand, as he said he'd be!" breathed Bob—"the man with the long beard."

That individual had appeared—from what covert Bob could not guess, but there he was.

A small iron bar in his hand, he dealt the engineer a sudden blow.

"What! who?"

The man at the Gatling gun turned with a sharp start.

He saw the engineer fall, he saw his assailant move toward himself, and guessing trouble, he gave the Gatling gun a swing.

It commanded the bearded man in an instant.

Bob saw him covered, saw the crank of the gun move to pour out a fusilade that would riddle an obstacle like a sieve.

He shot forward, forcing the wicker circle he had cut clear out.

"Treachery!" half-shouted Castelar's partner, but a commotion on the schooner drowned the echo of the cry.

Bob shrank, for he, too, was in range of the deadly piece of ordnance.

Snap!

R-r-rip!

"Don't you fire!"

"Zounds!"

"Take your hand off from that Gatling!"

The furled sail just over the spot had come rolling down like a curtain.

Jack landed on both feet, solid as a rock, less than a yard away from Castelar's amazed and unnerved emissary.

He poked a revolver under the fellow's nose, and as he threw up both hands to ward off a shot, Jack gave him a push beyond a chance of operating his formidable Gatling gun now.

Over a coil of rope the man stumbled, and on top of him Jack sprang.

He held him helpless with those brawny hands of his.

"Muffle him—he'll make an alarm!" ordered the young athlete as Bob ran up.

The bearded man had lifted the invisible engineer and was bearing him into the cabin.

"This one too," directed Bob.

Secured, gagged, the two villains were huddled out of harm's way in a safe cubby.

"Now what?" interrogated Bob rapidly.

"Now these—put them on!" directed the bearded man.

He tore from their hooks a lot of nautical attire.

Donning the disfiguring hats, the enveloping coats, as the trio regained the deck no token of their real identity was apparent.

The two crafts had been grappled together stern to stern.

Suddenly Castelar came scurrying across the deck of the schooner.

He bore a box in his arms, and he was breathless from the exertion of carrying it and the excitement.

He called the name of his partner, and Bob advanced from the Gatling gun where he had stationed himself.

"Take it!" spoke Castelar hurriedly—"we've got every man awake downed, and the other guarded. There's twenty boxes of specie."

Bob transferred the box over the rail.

"I'll see to this myself," went on Castelar. "Where's the engineer?"

Jack bustled into view about the cask on top of which the torpedo had been laid.

"We'll need the 'raiser'—after we've got everything—it's leave no trace!"

"All right," vaguely mumbled Bob.

"Keep the Gatling gun ready, in case of trouble."

It seemed that Castelar would trust nobody in the matter of the precious transfer.

Twenty trips he made—twenty trips, apparently to the cabin, in reality to the yawl, lowered astern, the well-muffled bearded man accomplished.

"Now then, I'll come and stow the stuff where the crowd won't be tempted to fight over it till we get ready to divide and abandon the steamer," said Castelar.

He sprang to the rail—two hands advanced as if to help him over, and down.

Two hands seized him as he landed on the deck, two others confronted him with glittering menaces that froze his astounded glance.

"What's this!" whispered Castelar hoarsely.

"Your doom, if you speak above a whisper!" said Bob.

"Not—not—oh! I am lost—lost—lost!"

The bearded man glided into view.

Purposely he revealed his white, stern face.

Like one crushed, Castelar writhed in the grasp of the two young detectives.

He was so scared that he did not even struggle as a gag was pressed into his mouth.

He was run to the stern, lowered over it into the yawl, where the boxes of gold were already in place.

"I hardly consider this the best way," spoke Bob to Jack.

"No?"

"We are leaving the crew."

"But the machinery has been disabled—they cannot drive ahead two rods."

"We might corner all hands."

"It's a risk. The bearded man insists on this programme. He demands Castelar's custody—he says get the gold safely hid ashore. That baffles the gang, don't it? Then we can get official help and swoop en masse down on the whole outfit."

Four in the yawl, a golden flooring of twenty cases of specie under them, the boat started for shore.

They could see its lights not far distant.

In the bow crouched Castelar.

Around his hands the bearded man had wound his beard and tied it, as if, although helpless, he wanted to be sure of contact with the man he had sought to find so long.

In his lap the bearded man carried the torpedo taken from the steamer.

"Run ashore, direct ashore—for those trees," he ordered, as they neared the beach.

"There are lights farther down shore," said Jack.

"Land here."

"Humor him," whispered Bob.

"I was to have this man's custody—that was the bargain," resumed Castelar's guardian, as he lifted him ashore and set the torpedo on the beach. "Why do you keep that horrible device? sink it!" spoke Jack.

"Not till all is safe."

"What do you mean?"

"The gold secure, this man surely beyond the reach of rescue. Till then I

keep it, for sooner than deliver him up to freedom again I would blow both of us to atoms. No, I keep it till you return. Go, find a safe place for the gold, so that by no mischance you are pursued and it is taken from you. Then return."

"Here?"

"Here."

"You will be here?" insisted Bob.

"Yes."

Castelar uttered a choked, shuddering wail way down in his throat.

His eyes were glaring, his face ashen.

Bob did not like the stern, grim manner of the bearded man.

"See here," he said, "I will do as you suggest, because you have helped us, stuck to us."

"You will find it the right way."

"But when we return, this man will be here?"

"I promise it."

"And you must deliver him up to justice, you know?"

"I swear to do so—I will deliver him into your hands!"

The pledge was given, but somehow to Bob Ferret it sounded like a death sentence.

CHAPTER XI.

"VENDETTA."

"Bob, I don't like it!"

"Don't like nailing a case in three hours time?"

"I don't mean that."

"With two hundred thousand dollars in gold at the end of it?"

"That's capital, but we've been—rushed."

"How?"

"Hypnotized!"

"Who by?"

"The bearded man."

"I'll confess, in his anxiety to be sure of Castelar's custody, he forced us to abandon the steamer when we might have bagged all hands," admitted Bob. "Still, there was a risk in staying. Never mind that now. It's a safe port for the gold we're after, and——"

Booin!

"What's that?"

"I should say so!"

The two young detectives had started

down the coast with the specie-filled yawl.

In the distance lights here and there encouraged them to believe that they would soon reach some settlement.

They had rowed slowly, for the oars were heavy, the laden yawl clumsy.

Discussing the outlook, their conversation had been suddenly interrupted.

Aloft sounded a boom—way up overhead.

A rocket searchlight burst into a ball of brilliant flame.

"Looking for us!" exclaimed Jack.

"On the steamer—sure!"

A second search rocket cleaved the air, this time in a contrary direction.

Two more followed—within the space of thirty seconds every point of the compass had been covered.

The rockets liberated a kind of fireworks parachute, and this continued for some time to emit glaring shoots of light that really lit up the water for quite a distance.

"Did you see?" spoke Jack, as the display ceased.

A big ship's yawl making in our direction?" said Bob. "Yes."

"They suspect——"

"They know, if they discovered the two men we overpowered."

"Bend to the oars!"

"Yes, this may be a race."

"Look there!"

Something flashed in the direction where they had observed the yawl.

Like a shied pebble skipping the water, a round, spinning ball of fire came rolling in the air toward them.

It was shot from a contrivance at the bow of the yawl.

"These fellows are well equipped," commented Bob.

"It's a class?"

"Sure thing!"

Bob centred all his energies, mental and physical, on eluding and outdistancing their pursuers.

He studied the shore, but promptly gave up all idea of a run thither at the point they were.

It was rocky, unbroken, and promised no sure hiding place for the gold, even if they succeeded in safely navigating a rock-strewn course thither.

The nearest light ahead was Bob's beacon.

"Make for that," he indicated, and both worked like beavers.

"Bob," panted Jack, over his arduous labors at the oar, "that's a floating light."

"All right."

"A ship—what then?"

"We'll have to trust to it—those fellows are gaining!"

They could hear excited shouts now, and the fireballs continued to pursue them.

They fell far to the rear, but they lighted up the water so the fugitive's boat was continually in view to the pursuing one.

Right into the face of the light they had noticed Bob drove the yawl.

"It's some stationary craft," commented Jack—"light fixed, railed around."

"Hail them aboard."

"A kind of flat scow, with cages."

"Cages?"

"Look for yourself. Ahoy, there!"

Floating along the side of the queer craft, Jack sang out his call.

There was a reply, but no human reply.

A series of the most frightful roars echoed, and a chorus of less grim yells, snarls and whinings followed.

"Why!" cried Bob, as passing the middle of the craft he observed some letters painted there—"it's a circus ship!"

"What's that?" interrogated Jack.

"See that label, 'Johnson Brothers Floating Menagerie.'"

"That's so!"

"Anchored here. Animals! hear them!"

"Bob, the schooner yawl!"

"What?"

"They're closing up on us."

Bob looked back. Jack was right.

"What shall we do?" hurriedly queried the latter.

For a minute Bob reflected.

"Hold her to the side," he said, a queer expression on his face.

Bob leaped to the craft, ran forward, took the great reflector lantern from its pole on the bow, turned the rays across the deck.

It contained 'sunken cages, sheet iron partitioned spaces.

In these were lions, tigers, wolves, bears—a menagerie presentment that made its presence vividly apparent, as disturbed by the light, the roars and yelpings were renewed.

Bob was puzzled to find nobody aboard—the appearance of this strangely laden craft here was something of a mystery.

His shrewd mind, however, was dealing with too active and vital a problem to be idle with unprofitable surmise.

His eyes snapped as he formed a resolution.

Bob ran back to where Jack was expectantly awaiting him.

"Jack," he spoke, "we don't dare land."

"It would be folly."

"Beyond are lights——"

"Those of a town probably."

"But too far away."

"Yes, we'd be overtaken."

"Those fellows are nearing us."

"Dreadfully near!"

"I've found a place for the gold."

"You mean——"

"A safety vault. Pass up a box."

"Why——"

"Do as I say."

"One!"

"One it is."

Bob lifted the box, weighing not less than fifty pounds.

He proceeded to where the top of a cage filled with lions stood.

Up its side ran an iron ladder on a tilt.

It was slanted away from the lower bars of the cage, so that the animals within could not reach through and paw a climber ascending.

Bob got up this without stooping.

In the top of the cage a section of the grating slid back to admit food.

Bob dropped his burden, pushed this back, rolled in the first box of gold.

It landed with a crash. The startled, aroused brutes sprang at it, clawing the precious prey.

Every one of the specie chests Bob carried to the cage and dumped.

"Now then!" he spoke to Jack.

"What?"

"Up with you!"

"On top of the cage?"

"Yes."

Bob set the ship's lantern so its rays fell across the deck and the cage—its focus away from them.

"We've got you!" cried a stentorian voice.

The man who had acted as doorkeeper in the city den stood in the bow of a yawl holding half a dozen fellows.

"Have you?" sang down Bob.

"We want that gold!"

"Come and take it!"

"It isn't in their boat—that's empty," cried a sharp voice.

"No, it's—there!"

"In that cage! You marplots! you——"

"Get back!"

"Row!"

"Keep back!"

Bob Ferret did what he had planned to do when he took up his present quarters.

He seized a chain that operated the lifting door of one of the cages containing a great, fierce-looking bear.

Instantly the animal walked out on deck.

Instantly, too, the baffled boatful backed water, changing their minds as to a rush to the deck of the floating menagerie.

"Scare them farther away," directed Bob.

Half a dozen shots made the men in the yawl row back around the corner of a projecting wall of rock along the shore.

Here they seemed to be discussing a sortie or some movement to rescue the coveted gold, for their voices sounded rapid and excited.

"They probably are not armed," suggested Jack—"put off in the schooner yawl in such a hurry they forgot their weapons, likely."

"We shall soon know. Anyway, I feel that we can hold the fort," declared Bob. Crash!

"Bob! what's that?"

"What? indeed!"

A frightful jar shook earth and sky.

A yellow quivering mine opened where the yawl had vanished.

Mingled yells of agony, horrible ecstasies rang out and then all was still.

The two young detectives sat appalled—they could not trace the mystery of the sudden explosion.

"I can't understand it!" spoke Jack.

"Unless some torpedo or other infernal machine they intended for us blew up on their hands," suggested Bob.

"We must investigate."

About to get down from the cage and regain their own boat by a course that would evade the bear they had set loose, now ranging the deck freely, a hail rang out:

"Hey, hello!"

"Who is that, I wonder?" muttered Bob.

"Hey! you—what's all this row—what you doing up there?"

A dozen men came into view from the near shore, poling a raft.

"Who are you?" sang back Jack.

"That's good!—we're the owners of this menagerie."

Bob ran over the top of the cage to the side nearest to the newcomers.

They had a lantern, and it reflected across rough but honest faces.

He was compelled to take the newcomers into his confidence.

Briefly he narrated the situation, and there was wonderment.

He mentioned the talismanic name of Nick Carter, and there was a spontaneous expression of co-operation.

"Good for you!" spoke the leader of the crowd. "You've put your gold where even we don't dare to go for it."

He explained that they were camping ashore.

The bear was driven back into its cage.

Bob and Jack got down to the raft, and its crew pushed them around to the scene of the explosion.

There were vestiges of the schooner's yawl—gruesome reminders of humanity—a jangled mass of copper and steel lying like a rent bombshell across the rocks.

From the top of a cliff above a wire trailed.

"Jack," said Bob, "do you guess?"

"The torpedo!"

"And the bearded man!"

"He dropped it!"

It was certainly the torpedo that Castelar's grim captor had brought from the steamer.

He must have observed the chase, and in the midst of discussing a scheme to dislodge and destroy the two young detectives, the doom of their enemies had been settled by the man who hated their leader.

Bob was uneasy as to the fate of Castelar, and he told Jack so.

The latter reminded him that the bearded man had agreed to deliver his charge up to them on demand, but this did not allay Bob's fears.

Leaving Jack to keep a watch on the gold, Bob took the yawl and rowed up to the point where he had landed Castelar and his enemy.

The bearded man had redeemed his promise—Castelar was waiting for him!

A thrill of horror oppressed Bob as he came upon him.

Hanging from a branch of a tree, stone dead, a paper pinned to his breast bore one ominous word:

"Vendetta!"

And the rope that had strangled the conspirator was formed of the twisted strands of the beard that would no longer identify the resolute executioner!

Jack heard Bob's report with a serious face.

Bob showed him some brief scrawls on the reverse side of the "Vendetta" chronicle.

It told how Castelar, after exhibiting the bearded man as a freak, had robbed him of all his earnings, had left his aged father and mother to starve, while pretending to send them weekly remittances of his salary.

He had sworn to exterminate him.

Nameless, he had hounded him across two continents.

Nameless, he would disappear forever—justice satisfied.

It was the first affair ever undertaken in which the members of Nick Carter's detective school had not delivered up the malefactors at the end of the case.

Vengeance had anticipated them, however, in the instance of the gold ship.

They had the satisfaction, nevertheless, of restoring to the real Cuban patriots

the two hundred thousand dollars so nearly lost to them.

They had done what the government detective had failed to do—unmask a gang of men posing as heroes, while really traitors and criminals.

The twisted beard that had served as a life line for Jack Burton, a death coil for the scheming Castelar, was the next day placed as the memento of a famous case in Nick Carter's cabinet of criminal curiosities.

All the members of the detective school were present, as Bob and Jack made their report to their patron—Buff Hutchinson, Aleck White, Larry Moore, Roxy, the flower girl.

"I suppose the gold ship will now resume its voyage?" suggested Aleck, speculatively.

"Yes, you've helped out the filibusters, boys," smiled Nick.

"Can't help that," said Bob—"they

own the money—our business was simply to recover it for them."

"And no questions asked," nodded Jack, shrewdly.

"Not even if they succeed in freeing Cuba," declared Bob Ferret.

"Which I sincerely hope they will do!" vehemently declared Roxy, the girl detective.

[THE END.]

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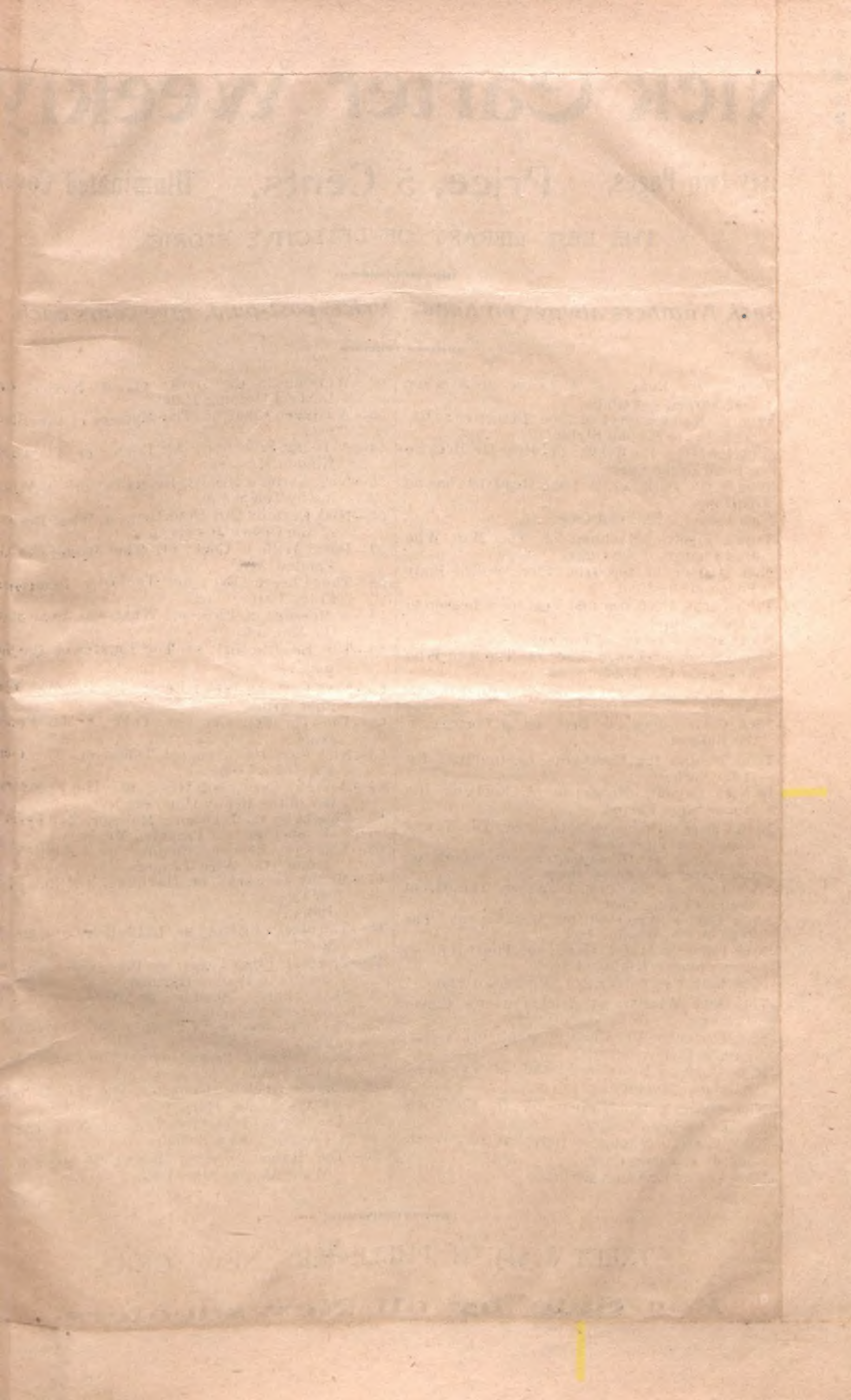
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